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Coker, Wincharles

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Exploration of Public-Speaking Anxiety among Novice Instructors at a Ghanaian University

Wincharles Coker
Senior Lecturer, Department of Communication Studies, College of Humanities and Legal Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7350-5040

Abstract
Glossophobia, or the fear of public speaking, has been researched more among students than among their instructors. This interpretive case study focuses on the latter group by examining their lived experience with public-speaking anxiety. The research involved 12 newly employed assistant lecturers at the University of Cape Coast (UCC), a Ghanaian public university. Data were collected through in-situ direct observation during instructional hours and in-depth interviews with the participants. The study identifies three main causes of anxiety among the participants, namely (1) unpreparedness and/or lack of adequate preparation; (2) fear and diffidence; and (3) perceived intimidation by the audience. The study also finds that these public-speaking challenges can be overcome through frequent practice, active engagement with the audience, and adequate preparation.

Keywords
public speaking, anxiety, glossophobia, strategies, university instructors, Ghana

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1. Introduction

Anxiety about speaking in public, also called glossophobia, has attracted considerable interest among researchers. LeFebvre et al. (2018) describe public-speaking anxiety as a type of communication anxiety that stimulates excessive physiological arousal and/or negative cognitive thoughts. This is because as soon as a person's mind becomes victim to anxiety's grip and is uncontrolled, the subject's ability to freely articulate their thoughts is affected. Individuals with public-speaking anxiety usually experience a number of symptoms, including palpitations, sweating, discomfort, diarrhoea, and confusion (Bodie, 2010; Dansieh et al., 2021; Hook et al., 2013). Anxiety may not always be negative; in some contexts, anxiety helps the individual to be fully prepared for the task ahead of them (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002).

The apprehension that usually accompanies a speaking performance can be inhibiting. Kankam and Boateng (2017) note that it can prevent persons from succeeding professionally or academically. Yet, although public-speaking anxiety can affect every speaker in one context or another (Hofmann, 2007), most of the studies conducted on the subject have concentrated on students as participants and respondents (Dansieh et al., 2021; Dobržinskienė, 2017; Hook et al., 2013; Linardopoulos, 2010; Raja, 2017). Given this focus, speech communication scholars have paid insufficient attention to how public-speaking anxiety impacts on the communication of instructors in the instructional process.

To address this apparent gap in the research, this study examined the nature of public-speaking anxiety among newly employed university instructors at the University of Cape Coast (UCC) in Ghana. Based on my association with this cohort as Faculty Registration and Examination Officer, I understood that these lecturers had little prior training in lecturing during their previous work as either teaching assistants or research assistants. This study therefore sought to examine the lived experience of these largely inexperienced instructors regarding the anxieties they had in speaking publicly during instructional hours. To meet this objective, the study focused on identifying the causes of public-speaking anxiety among this cohort, and exploring the measures they employed to overcome this communication difficulty. Unlike recent studies that have investigated public-speaking anxiety among African tertiary *students* (e.g., Raja, 2017; Dansieh et al., 2021; Prentiss, 2021), the study focused on *instructors*, and addressed the following research questions:

- RQ 1: What factors cause public-speaking anxiety among newly employed instructors?
- RQ 2: How do these instructors overcome public-speaking anxiety?

2. Literature review

Defining public speaking and public-speaking anxiety

Speaking in public requires great tact, and mastery of numerous elements. Among other things, the speaker must be competent in the subject to be shared, must have knowledge of the audience, and must understand the context surrounding the speech. The way one chooses to speak in the classroom, at a job interview, or at a conference, is likely to differ significantly based on the elements just listed. One basic characteristic that may be found in all such genres, however, is that the speech may be a sustained presentation (Verderber et al., 2011, p. 20). The successful presentation of a speech requires the speaker to approach the presentation not only as an act but as a process (Nikitina, 2011, p. 10). Rhetorical knowledge of arrangement, composition, and style is necessary for overcoming the anxiety that is likely to occur during public speaking.

Vitasari et al. (2010, p. 3) define anxiety as "a psychological and physical response to treat a self-concept characterized by subjective, consciously perceived feelings of tension". Public-speaking anxiety can, therefore, be described as a kind of anxiety that occurs in a specific public context, arising from the anticipation of an oral presentation (Bodie, 2010). Bodie (2010) distinguishes between *trait* public-speaking anxiety and *state* public-speaking anxiety. The former refers to anxiety caused by the personality of an individual. For instance, persons with chronic fears, worries, or anxieties may be said to experience trait public-speaking anxiety. State public-speaking anxiety, on the other hand, is a temporary condition that an individual speaker experiences for a short period. This anxiety can be overcome after another condition sets in.

Knowledge of public-speaking anxiety

Pull (2012) analyses the types of psychological and physiological reactivity to public speaking among persons who were anxious about speaking in front of others. The study discovers that virtual reality exposure and internet-based self-help were efficient in overcoming public-speaking anxiety among the participants. Blöte et al. (2009) examine whether specific public-speaking anxiety can be considered a subtype on its own. In their study, participants with public-speaking fears were compared to persons who have more than one kind of fear. Findings concerning fear reactions of the sub-groups are inconsistent. One group with public-speaking anxiety reported higher anxiety when making a speech than the group with more generalised social anxiety, while other groups with public-speaking anxiety reported less anxiety when speaking than those with generalised anxiety. The study also discovers that patients with speech anxiety reacted more physiologically when they spoke in public than those with general phobias. The authors conclude that public-speaking anxiety is a unique type of social phobia that is different from other phobias.

Causes of public-speaking anxiety

Research on the causes of public-speaking anxiety is concerned with the causes of such anxiety at various levels and settings. Of particular reference is a quantitative study conducted by Raja (2017) to identify the causes of anxiety among 50 undergraduate students who took a course in public speaking at a private business school in Karachi, Pakistan. The author emphasises that students felt uncomfortable while speaking to others because they had a meek nature and also lacked confidence. The study also shows that 75% of respondents feared speaking in public, and confessed that the size of the audience caused nervousness among them during presentations. Raja (2017) recommends that practising presentations a number of times with a small number of people will help students to speak in public with ease, and that proper preparation will enable them to recover when they deviate or get confused while speaking in public.

In examining the causes of public-speaking anxiety, one needs to distinguish between the anxiety of speaking in front of a group of individuals and the anxiety of interacting with a group – the difference between what Hook et al. (2013) label performance anxiety and interaction anxiety. They describe performance anxiety as a type of anxiety that occurs when a speaker is being observed or scrutinised by another or an audience, while interaction anxiety takes place in a dyadic and/or group interaction. Hook et al. (2013) observe that panic disorder and other fear disorders are symptoms of both performance anxiety and interaction anxiety. In their view, performance anxiety is caused by external factors and demands from situations that involve concerns regarding other persons' evaluations of a speaker's behavior. Interaction anxiety, on the other hand, deals with attention to internal factors and situational demands that lead to personal assessments.

Public speaking as a challenge among students

Without doubt, public speaking is a daunting task to the majority of students in the context of instructor-student communication. Dobržinskienė (2017) posits that the principal cause of speaking anxiety is the body language and anatomy of the student-speaker. The author states that when an audience notices a tremulous voice, sweaty palms, flushed cheeks, and other physical manifestations by the speaker, this doubles the anxiety of the speaker. Fear of the audience is also reported by the author. One of the participants in Dobržinskienė's (2017) study stated that he wanted to run and return to his seat because he felt that he could hardly breathe. The majority of the participants, who were second-year law students studying at a university in Lithuania, were anxious when preparing for public speaking. Meanwhile, Linardopoulos (2010, p. 2) emphasises that effective public speaking is a skill sought by employers.

3. Theoretical framework

The study employed the processing efficiency theory (PET) as formulated by Eysenck and Calvo (1992). The theory explains the impacts of anxiety on people's lives, and assumes that anxiety is caused by situational threat or stress (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992). The theory holds that level state anxiety determines personal differences in cognitive processing and performance. It stresses that worry is a key element that forms the cognitive component of state anxiety (Morris et al., 1981). Worry during public speaking affects working memory. Working memory has been defined as "those mechanisms or processes that are involved in the control, regulation, and active maintenance of task-relevant information in the service of complex cognition" (Miyake & Shah, 1999, p. 450).

PET assumes that worry serves as a motivation function through a control system probably located within the working memory system. The functioning of this system leads to the allocation of additional processing resources, that is, effort and to the initiation of processing activities, which are the strategies. Such attempts, if successful, increase available working memory capacity. As a consequence, potential performance impairments caused by the utilisation of working memory resources can be compensated for by the allocation of additional resources or activities. A central contention of PET is that there is a control or self-regulatory system which is involved in mediating the effects of anxiety on processing and performance (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992).

Two major types of reactions to poor performance are initiated by the control system. First, it is sometimes possible to cope directly with the current level of threat and/or worry. There is a consequent reduction in worry and an increase in the available capacity of working memory. Second, it is often possible to reduce or eliminate the negative effects of worry on task performance by applying additional effort, that is, extra processing resources to the task. The complex nature of the various functions of the control system indicates that it is located within the working memory system (Eysenck & Calvo, 1992).

4. Research design

The study employed the interpretive case study design. In interpretive research, the focus is not necessarily on the sample size in the interest of achieving generalisability. Rather, emphasis is placed on depth and rigour (Creswell, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Rather than using a large sample size, the interpretive researcher can work with a fairly small sample while aiming for a thick description of the phenomenon being described. The ultimate goal is to capture an instance of truth, and not to obtain universal, nomothetic laws (Lincoln et al., 2011; Tracy, 2013). I found this methodological approach suitable for obtaining in-depth responses about what the instructors thought and how they felt about sensitive subjects such as public-speaking anxiety.

Sample size and sampling procedure

Using a purposive non-probability sampling method, the study selected 12 assistant lecturers employed during the 2020/21 academic year, out of a target population of 19 assistant lecturers employed in the UCC Faculty of Arts at the time of this study (UCC, n.d.). I recruited the 12 participants based on their willingness to participate in the study, a process aided by their collegial association with me. The sample comprised six male and six female assistant lecturers, from across nine departments within the Faculty of Arts.

Instruments

Two instruments were used in collecting data, namely a direct observation guide and an interview protocol. Direct observation is a naturalistic inquiry that enables researchers to draw on their knowledge and experience to build trust and good relations with their participants in order to obtain information from them (Sirris et al., 2022, p. 138). As a research method, direct observation allows researchers to immerse themselves in the phenomenon under inquiry – and to be able make note of non-verbal cues, feelings, situated behaviours, or social practices – with the aim of interpreting numerous layers of meaning (Fine, 2003). Spanning a period of 12 weeks (i.e., September to November 2021), I was permitted by my participants to sit in on their classes to observe their interactions and instructional processes. This enabled me to make notes of my observations in-situ.

My observations were supported by in-depth interviews with each of the participants. An in-depth interview, according to Oppong (2013), is the best way to explore and gather experiential narratives, and it is the most appropriate method when detailed insights are required from individual participants (Teddlie & Yu, 2007). Such interviews provide participants with the opportunity to describe their experiences and tell their own stories in their own words. The interview protocol comprised three sets of questions, on the following subjects: (1) interviewees' experiences with speaking in the classroom; (2) interviewees' challenges when speaking in the classroom; and (3) measures employed by the interviewees to overcome public-speaking anxiety. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Coding and coding scheme

Using Watkins's (2017) rigorous and accelerated data reduction (RADaR) technique, I identified nine main analytical themes in the data connected to public-speaking anxiety. The themes were arrived at through parsing, coding, and systematising data. This involved, first of all, line-by-line coding. I reflected on the data over and over again, so as to underline, circle, and colour-code key words and phrases. The second stage of coding enabled me to link words to form ideas. Here, I penned my thoughts and observations of the data in a relaxed manner, and began to develop concepts.

The emerging ideas gave birth to messy themes and notions, and 13 rough codes were initially generated. These codes were further collapsed into nine themes, using a coding scheme as follows:

- CAU: causes of public-speaking anxiety
- UNP: unpreparedness
- LAP: lack of adequate preparation
- FAD: fear and diffidence
- INT: intimidation by the audience
- MEA: measures for overcoming public-speaking anxiety
- ADP: adequate preparation
- COP: constant practice
- ENA: engagement with audience

Ethical considerations

A number of ethical principles were taken into consideration in conducting the study. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Participants were assured of anonymity and confidentiality, and were also assured of their ability to withdraw their consent if they felt uneasy or compromised in any way.

5. Results and discussion

University instructors' lived experience of public-speaking anxiety

Analysis of the data revealed that participant-assistant lecturers reported having experienced public-speaking anxiety during instructional hours. The excerpts below reflect what a male assistant lecturer and a female assistant lecturer had to say on the subject:

> **Illustration 1**
> Well, it wasn't rosy. I remember I greeted "good morning" in a level 100 [first-year university] class and I went totally blank. So, the next morning, I organised myself well and it got better. I must say that it is not something that you start with. Some people may have the idea that public speaking is inherent. But it is an act you need to master. At the beginning, you would have bumps here and there. That's what we call stage fright. But with experience it will get better. (Instructor A, 10 September 2021)

> **Illustration 2**
> It was a nice experience but it wasn't easy actually at all. Your first time entering a lecture hall full of students, some even way older than you, and you are lecturing them. It wasn't easy. Hmm, I remember when I stood in front of them and all of a sudden, I lost everything and I was like ouch. I had to do a little breathing exercise to regain my composure. (Instructor B, 10 September 2021)

The excerpts above support the claim by Eysenck and Calvo (1992) that worry, as was experienced by both the male and female assistant lecturers quoted, is a key element that forms the cognitive component of state anxiety.

Causes of public-speaking anxiety among university instructors

The study revealed three major causes of public-speaking anxiety among the Ghanaian university instructors. These are (1) unpreparedness or lack of adequate preparation; (2) fear and diffidence; and (3) intimidation by the audience.

Unpreparedness or lack of adequate preparation

The study showed that seven participants noted that unpreparedness or lack of adequate preparation was the major factor that caused anxiety when speaking in public, particularly in the classroom. The excerpt below from another female participant succinctly captures this observation:

> **Illustration 3**
> It happened when I was asked to chair an occasion which I knew nothing about. The person who was to do it called at the last minute that he couldn't make it. So, as a vice to that person I had to steer the occasion for him and had to give a speech. Hmm, it was something else because I had not prepared and I didn't know what to say and even how to begin. It was a really a big blow to me, and seriously […] I can still remember that day like today. It wasn't easy at all because I had not prepared. (Instructor C, 7 October 2021)

Analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that this type of performance anxiety sometimes occurred among the participants. Besides the participants' lack of preparation and preparedness to make an extemporaneous speech, a special kind of anxiety that I will call "situational speech anxiety" emerges from the data set. Similar to Hook et al.'s (2017) idea of performance anxiety, situational anxiety, on the other hand, may be described as a particular type of performance anxiety in which a speaker is called upon momentarily to stand in for the billed speaker who is either absent or unable to deliver the speech due to circumstances beyond their control. Seen this way, *situational public-speaking anxiety* may also be termed *expectation public-speaking anxiety* as the new speaker is anxious about meeting the expectations of the onlooking audience. This type of stress, according to Eysench and Calvo (1992), may be caused by occasional stress accompanied by the threat of failure.

Diffidence and the fear of making mistakes

In addition to lack of adequate preparation, lack of confidence also caused participants to experience intense public-speaking anxiety. Here is an example from a male informant:

> **Illustration 4**
> In one of my class interactions, I thought others were more qualified than myself to stand in front of the class. I nearly called off the class as I was not too sure where and how to start the lecture. My legs and buttocks began shaking. (Instructor D, 10 October 2021)

One may note from the excerpt above that the level of diffidence experienced by Instructor D was caused mainly by the fear of making mistakes. In addition to Instructor D, five other participants spoke of instances when they feared that they might not perform or speak well on a subject. This finding is consistent with that of Dobržinskienė's (2017) study, which reported on students' tendency to want to run from the classroom when they experience public-speaking anxiety. Although study participants were instructors, and claimed they came prepared, the sight of their audiences scared them. They feared that they might not say the right thing. Here is a continuation of the excerpt in Illustration 4 from the same assistant lecturer (Instructor D):

> **Illustration 5**
> You know, teaching at the SHS [senior high school] level is a different game. You make an error [at SHS level] and […] and your students may notice it, or they may simply tease you afterward. But at the university level, these undergraduate students are, first of all, people who have graduated from senior high school, and so are mature. Secondly, they are now exposed to university education because they are reading lots of books and other educational materials. Therefore, your anxiety as an instructor can be high if you're delivering content and you make unpardonable bloopers. (Instructor D, 10 October 2021)

Analysis of the transcript of this participant showed that the source of his lack of confidence in speaking publicly could be caused by his trait anxiety. One can note that he was concerned about how lack of mastery of subject content could result in his inability to perform optimally in front of his student-audience who, in his own words, "are reading lots of books and other educational materials".

Intimidation by audience

As is to be expected, participants who lacked confidence and therefore feared speaking in public also experienced being intimidated by their audience. Some participants noted that the audience scared them and therefore they could not speak with confidence. This was observed mainly among female participants as they felt intimidated by either their peers during board or faculty meetings, or during instructional hours. Here is what a female participant said on the subject:

> **Illustration 6**
> I was once asked a particular question by a student. I can't exactly recall what the question was, but as I started speaking, it was like everybody in the class was looking at me, and since my mind went on them, I forgot everything that I was supposed to say. (Instructor E, 12 November 2021)

This finding is consistent with the study of pre-service teachers in the Philippines by Kenoh III (2021), which revealed that when audiences have high expectations or are critical of their speakers, this can cause them to experience higher levels of public-speaking anxiety. However, responses from my study participants showed that audience intimidation may be either *imagined* or *real*. It must be noted that even though some participants identified the causes above as reasons for their anxiety during public speaking, they, nonetheless, made frantic efforts to deal with this challenge. Composure, a courageous mindset, and a can-do spirit were employed as coping strategies.

Measures for overcoming public-speaking anxiety among university instructors

Interactions with study participants showed three measures for overcoming public-speaking anxiety among the participants. These are adequate preparation, constant practice, and active engagement with the audience.

Adequate preparation

Adequate preparation was one of the measures that nine participants employed in minimising public-speaking anxiety. This finding is consistent with prior studies among students in different cultures (e.g., Raja, 2017; Blöte, 2021; Kenoh III, 2021). The difference between these two cohorts, with respect to their state of speech anxiety, in my estimation, has to do with the degree of preparation each cohort may engage in. As a matter of fact, the majority of the assistant lecturers indicated that adequate preparation (such as audible speech rehearsals in front of colleagues, advanced teaching preps, and the use of basic

teaching aids) enabled them to have mastery over their subject matter. Below are two examples of what was said:

> **Illustration 7**
> The effective ways of preparing for speaking in public are to do good preparation and also to rehearse the speech. That is, if a speaker prepares well, anxiety becomes minimal. (Instructor F, 14 November 2021)

> **Illustration 8**
> Preparation helps in dealing with the struggle. You don't want to be overly confident and flop. I also read, or do more research on the topic to get more information about the subject matter that I am presenting on to help me to overcome or minimise anxiety. (Instructor G, 14 November 2021)

Constant practice

As has been confirmed by prior research (e.g., Dansieh et al., 2021; Kenoh III, 2021), participants also identified constant practice as one of the measures for overcoming public-speaking anxiety. Analysis of interview transcripts and direct observations showed that the majority of study participants engaged in frequent practice before speaking to student audiences. This included verbal practice. Here is an excerpt from one participant's response:

> **Illustration 9**
> Anxiety is normal and is bound to happen when giving a speech. However, when it happens, you have to come out quickly and don't get stuck where you are. You should be doing it more often if you are the timid type like myself. One can overcome anxiety through constant practice by gathering people and talking to them or standing in front of your mirror and then rehearsing what you are about doing or going to deliver. This may sound awkward to you, but whenever I have a lecture to attend, I first practise. I do it with my teddy bears and it helps. This is what I have been doing before I speak in public. (Instructor H, 15 November 2021)

Engagement with the audience

Participants indicated that active engagement with the audience was another effective way of dealing with public-speaking challenges. The study observed that prior to starting instructional contact with the class, they engaged in phatic communication. For instance, they walked around the lecture hall to engage in small talk and find out how students were faring in their social lives. This was also followed by encouraging group discussions, and engaging in follow-ups on previous class discussions. Only after those initial engagements would the instructor then usher the class into the lecture of the day, and engage the class more formally in a public-speaking mode.

6. Conclusion

The study set out to investigate the lived experience of novice university instructors concerning public-speaking anxiety at a public university in Ghana. The study showed that such anxiety is caused by three main psychological triggers, namely: unpreparedness or lack of adequate preparation; fear and diffidence; and intimidation by the audience. The study also revealed that adequate preparation, constant practice, and engagement with the audience are key strategies employed by the lecturers in order to overcome their anxiety when speaking in public. Although this study did not consider a gendered perspective to public-speaking anxiety, the study, nonetheless, showed that the phenomenon was more pronounced among male instructors than among female instructors.

The discovery of situational or expectation public-speaking anxiety may be considered as a modest contribution to existing knowledge on public-speaking anxiety. It could be classified as a sub-type of state public-speaking anxiety. Again, the study provides a distinction between imagined and/or real intimidation emanating from the audience. It is recommended that gender-based research on public-speaking anxiety among instructors be conducted. Such research can focus on gender variation in terms of prior-speech preparation as well as gendered variation in presentation dynamics.

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